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BAGHDAD FOR HOSTAGE WORKING GROUP

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TAGS: [KPAO PREL](#) [OA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)
SUBJECT: WADAH KHANFAR TAKES THE HELM OF THE AL JAZEERA
NETWORK

REF: A. DOHA 312
[1](#)B. DOHA 317

Classified By: Ambassador Chase Untermeyer, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: PAO met March 27 with Wadah Khanfar, Managing Director of Al Jazeera satellite channel. Khanfar discussed his recent appointment as Director-General of the Al Jazeera Network, noting that his two mandates are to minimize costs by integrating the infrastructures of the diverse Al Jazeera entities and to develop a brand strategy. He has been given a year to complete the integration and to come up with a business model for privatization. Khanfar said that Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera International will remain independent editorially. Khanfar said AJ would not give embassies of countries with hostages in Iraq copies of hostage tapes but would permit their law enforcement authorities to view the tape in any location with an Al Jazeera bureau. Khanfar also discussed AJ's March 25 interview with a representative of the "Islamic Army in Iraq" and a September 2005 series on 9/11 prepared by AJ reporter Yousri Fouda. End summary.

The new position

[1](#)2. (C) Wadah discussed his appointment as Director General of the Al Jazeera Network, the entity set up to assure unity of brand and operations among the different Al Jazeera entities. Khanfar, who is also a member of the recently-named AJN Board (Ref A), said the DG position will not have a role in the day-to-day running of the different Al Jazeera entities. The DG's mandate is two-fold, he said: to integrate the infrastructures of the diverse Al Jazeera entities and to develop a unified brand strategy. In his new position, Khanfar now oversees the following bodies:

- Al Jazeera Arabic, est. 1996
- Al Jazeera International, to be launched later this year.
- Al Jazeera Arabic website (currently under AJ editorial control).
- Al Jazeera English website (currently under AJI editorial control).
- Al Jazeera Mubashir: Est. 2005. Live conferences, meetings, discussions, comparable to C-span.
- Al Jazeera Sports, est. 2003. 24/7 sports news channel.
- Al Jazeera Documentary - to be launched 2006. 24-hour

Arabic programming, comparable to the Discovery Channel.
-- Al Jazeera Training Center - est. Feb 2004, providing training to AJ and regional journalists; eyeing a regional role in media reform efforts.
-- Al Jazeera Center for Studies - Doha-based think tank, est. 2005; designed to provide an academic Arab perspective on socio-political-economic issues affecting the region.
-- Al Jazeera Mobile, bilingual, SMS-based breaking news service.

13. (C) The exception to this list is the Al Jazeera Children's Channel (est. 2005, targets Arabic-speaking children aged 3-15; billed as "edutainment"), which Al Jazeera co-owns with Qatar Foundation. At ten percent, the AJ ownership of the children's channel is not large enough for it to be included in an eventual business plan. Khanfar said he has been given a year to complete the integration process and to come up with a business model for privatization to present to the AJN Board of Directors. He stressed that the two satellite channels, AJ and AJI, will be editorially independent and will not be subject to central control from AJN. He noted that AJN has created an IT directorate, an engineering directorate and an administrative directorate, but has not created an AJN news directorate. Each channel will keep their current news directors (Ahmed Sheikh in the case of AJ and Steve Cook in the case of AJI), and although there will inevitably be a degree of coordination between the two, there is no expectation of either's toeing a central editorial line. Khanfar described the AJN organizational chart as starting at the top with board chairman Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer, followed by the AJN Board itself, then the position of DG, who oversees the Executive Council, made up of the managing directors of the present channels (Nigel Parsons in the case of AJI and himself in the case of AJ, among others). The Executive Council would be the body most closely involved in the day-to-day running of the different AJ entities, he said.

Will Khanfar stay on as MD of Al Jazeera?

14. (C) Asked if he planned to stay on as Managing Director of Al Jazeera Arabic, Khanfar laughed and said: "I have a plan to replace myself." He said that although he is staying on for the moment at Al Jazeera Arabic's helm, he envisioned a gradual withdrawal as he becomes more involved in the business aspect of AJN operations, but he did not say whom he intended to replace him.

Final goal: Privatization?

15. (C) Khanfar said he will spend the coming year weighing three different business models that have been proposed to AJN for its eventual privatization (including one prepared by Ernst & Young, he said). His goal is to make a selection by year's end and propose it to the AJN Board of Directors for adoption. Privatizing the Al Jazeera entities as a package would make it a package worth three times Al Jazeera Arabic alone, a package that would also be "less troublesome, less scary" to the investor than Al Jazeera Arabic by itself, he said. When PAO said that speculation about Al Jazeera privatization has come and gone with regularity and no results over the last few years, he said, "That was because there was no mechanism on which to make a decision on privatization. Now we will have one."

Hostage tapes

16. (C) PAO recalled Khanfar's conversation with Emboffs and U/S Hughes in February (Ref B and previous), in which the US petitioned Al Jazeera to reconsider its editorial policy and allow embassies whose nationals have been kidnapped in Iraq a physical copy of the videotapes sent to Al Jazeera by hostage-takers. Khanfar said he had raised the issue with his fellow board of directors and the board's decision had been negative. As he had explained previously, Khanfar said, Al

Jazeera does not want to become embroiled in legal action surrounding the tapes and for that reason does not want to become part of any chain of evidence. He said, however, that law enforcement officials of the countries in question are welcome to view the tape on Al Jazeera premises at any time and for any length of time. PAO asked if future tapes of US hostages could be transmitted to the Al Jazeera bureau in Washington for examination by US authorities on Al Jazeera premises there, and Khanfar said, "Yes, of course," adding that AJ had already performed this service for German officials in the past.

Interview with Iraqi hostage-taking group

17. (C) PAO then referred to a March 25 Al Jazeera interview with a representative of the "Islamic Army in Iraq" who claimed to be part of a group that kidnapped journalists and executed them if they were found to be "spies." PAO asked how such an interview could be justified in light of Al Jazeera's stated policy of condemning kidnapping and violence against journalists. Khanfar said that this was not the first time this individual had been interviewed on Al Jazeera, although in the past interviews with him have been conducted by phone. He said the subject's message was "very political" and the interview was valid news, as he is a member of a current organization and gave important information about the organization itself. He also made an offer to negotiate with the United States, Khanfar said, adding that the original interview was much longer than the version that aired and that he himself had "personally intervened" to take out some "very strong statements" made by the interviewee. PAO asked where the interview was filmed, and whether it was filmed in Baghdad. Khanfar said it was not filmed in Baghdad but, he said, "it is difficult to tell you where, because that was the condition of filming it, that we would not say." He said all he could say was that it was filmed by the Al Jazeera Beirut correspondent.

Delay in launch of Al Jazeera International

18. (C) Khanfar confirmed his own press recent statement announcing the probably delay of the launch of Al Jazeera International, due to technical reasons (a delay in delivering IT systems). He said the channel is now looking at an early summer launch, instead of a late spring one.

Yousri Fouda series on 9/11

19. (C) PAO gave Khanfar a copy of February's DIA unclassified snippets and also a non-paper on a four-part series on 9/11 prepared by Al Jazeera reporter Yousri Fouda which aired last September. The non-paper, prepared by IIP/SC's Counter-Misinformation team, criticized the series for espousing unfounded conspiracy theories concerning the events of 9/11. When Khanfar heard Fouda's name he rolled his eyes and appeared to know immediately which series was in question. "I thought it was stupid myself," he said. He said channel editors had intervened to make the original series more balanced than it had started out, but he had received many complaints about the series nonetheless. He thanked PAO for the input.

Comment:

110. (C) Khanfar was his usual urbane, articulate, professional self. At 38, he is relatively young to have attained a position of such influence. His vision is now clearly fixed on his new mandate, which is considerably wider and much more international in scope than the activities of the Arabic channel. His reference to making the Arabic channel more attractive to investors by "packaging" it within a group of less polarizing additional entities that will in turn treble the value of the original was a telling figure of speech.

¶11. (C) As we have previously reported, there has been a considerable amount of tension between Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera International, with many viewing it as a de facto struggle for Arab/Islamist control of the Al Jazeera brand name, and supporting or opposing Khanfar's candidacy for the DG position on the grounds that he would impose such control over Al Jazeera International. His statements espousing and endorsing independent editorial directions for the two channels would seem to contradict this last view but we will continue to report on the politics of the situation as they develop.

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